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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
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Early Childhood Education: “Why Universal Pre-K Makes Sense for America”
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Good morning. *Buenos dias.*

I am pleased to be here today to moderate this panel about early childhood education, and specifically about the proposal known as “universal pre-K.” Our panelists will discuss the potential benefits of universal pre-K for the Hispanic community. They will also discuss the financial and other factors that might serve as an obstacle to the implementation of universal pre-K, and whether and how those obstacles can be overcome. I will provide some very brief remarks to help frame the issue, and then turn the floor over to the subject-matter experts.

For starters, it is important to understand the terms we are using. What is the definition of a pre-K program? What distinguishes pre-K programs from other programs for preschoolers? And when we use the phrase “universal pre-K,” what do we mean?

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, pre-K programs are a group of programs designed to ensure that preschoolers are ready for kindergarten and can succeed

in school by third grade. Pre-K programs have three traits in common: they focus on school readiness; they serve four-year-olds and sometimes three-year-olds; and they are governed by high program standards.

The term “universal pre-K” means that pre-K programs are available to any child in a particular state or territory, irrespective of family income or the child’s abilities. Naturally, this means that universal pre-K cannot become a reality without significant and sustained government spending.

So that begs the question: why should policymakers support pre-K programs, with the goal of expanding them to as many children as possible and ultimately making them available to all children? In my view, the answer is straightforward. Because the social science evidence confirms what we all know intuitively to be true—namely that a child’s early years have a profound impact on his or her lifelong development and quality of life. Those children that develop language, reasoning and other skills at a young age are far more likely to experience professional and personal success than those who do not. Government funding of pre-K programs—whether it takes place at the federal, state or local level—should therefore be viewed as a prudent long-term *investment* that will ultimately produce significant benefits for our society. These benefits can take many forms, including improved academic performance, reduced drop-out rates, a more capable workforce, less reliance on government safety-net programs, and lower levels of crime. In short, universal pre-K deserves support for intensely practical reasons. Universal pre-k is both the right thing to do *and* the smart thing to do.

So, how well are we doing in achieving this objective? The short answer is: not great. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, about 40 states and Washington D.C. offer some kind of state-funded pre-K program—which, in total, reach only about 1.3 million children. Nationwide, less than 30 percent of four-year-olds and only four percent of three-year-olds have access to these state-funded programs. Even when we include in our calculation children who attend the federal Head Start and Early Head Start programs, it remains the case that about 60 percent of four-year-olds and about 90 percent of three-year-olds are not enrolled in government-funded early education programs. In summary, we have a great deal of work to do if we are going to reach the goal, articulated by President Obama in his 2013 State of the Union address, of expanding access to high-quality preschool to every child in America.

Now, why is this issue so important to the Hispanic community? Well, approximately one-of-every-four preschool-aged child in the United States is Hispanic, and that percentage will only increase in the coming years. The resources and support that we make available to our young boys and girls today—or that we *fail* to make available to them—will have serious long-term consequences for them personally and for our communities writ large.

In my view, one of the greatest benefits of universal pre-K is that it would help close the opportunity gap facing so many Hispanic children, especially those from less affluent communities, who too often enter kindergarten unprepared or underprepared, and are essentially playing catch-up with their peers right from the beginning. Government-supported pre-K programs make the playing field more even; they empower communities to empower

themselves. These programs reflect a fundamental truth eloquently stated by Horace Mann, a leading education advocate: Education, he said: “Beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men.”

Along with you, I look forward to hearing from our panelists about how to make the dream of universal pre-K, or something approaching it, a reality.

Thank you.